

The Grand Evil Overlord and Master of Star Trek is Paramount. The Senior Apprentice Evil-Doer of Star Traks is A. Decker. I, the one whom authors BorgSpace, hold the position of Lowly Footstool of Depravity, Third Class.

A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste

Around an orange-yellow dwarf star, seven planets spun. The outer four were vast gas giants, two sporting extensive ring systems; and the inner three rocky globes. A sparse swarm of asteroid debris circled the star within the orbit of the gas giants, surrounding one of the terrestrial spheres, consequently turning it into a lifeless hell of craters, volcanoes, and crust-shattering quakes. The innermost planet swung just above the corona of its sun, tidally locked to its primary, one face a lava sea and the other a few frozen degrees from absolute zero. The remaining planet was, as an infamous fable says, just right.

Magnify for a closer look at the second terrestrial planet, orbiting the middle of the water zone. Moderate icecaps, fifty percent ocean, continents with snow topped mountain ranges surrounded by lowland forests of green and grassy plains of brown. The night side sparkles with ribbons of light connecting brightly lit starfish cities, arms stretching wide. Single points of white on a backdrop of black are lone ships crossing the oceans. In near orbit, stations and factories circle, serviced by hundreds of ships of many sizes, but all built to resemble dumbbells: two large globes connected at the equator by a cylinder.

Refocus the scene on two rather small moons. Both are in exactly the same orbit of approximately twenty-five days, although one-hundred eighty degrees opposite of each other. It is not a natural occurrence. Closer examination of the moons, this time in frequencies not of the visual range, reveals the artificial character. Black holes, mere pinpoints a few atoms in diameter, are encased in vast spheres of alloy and covered by pulverized asteroids to create a synthetic regolith. The end result are vast power sources - very dangerous if one or both become unstable - that have been altered to not only provide energy via microwave emitters located in a broad band about the equator, but serve as platforms for colonization, visible as a scattered series of landing pads and airlocks.

The home system of species #8511 had been found.

Cube #347 slid smoothly into high orbit. Near space was filled with a variety of space junk: cast off shuttle parts, dead satellites, loose debris. The two artificial moons cast a baleful presence over all, but thus far had proved themselves to be inert despite the ample evidence they were mock shells englobing immense energy sources. Communication satellites whizzed in circles around their planet, as did several dozen space stations, micro-gee industrial complexes, and shipyards. A new space elevator was in the process of assembly, extruded carbon inching planetward a few meters per day from a mechanical "spider" squatting on a chondrite asteroid in geosynchronous orbit.

Cube #347 was being ignored. Although it had entered the system openly, there had been no obvious interest in the trespass. Now in orbit of the home planet of species #8511, no hail greeted the cube, not even a peep from the local space traffic control. Multiple ships began adjustments to move to alternate orbits if their pathway intersected the cube, but that was the only overt acknowledgment of the arrival. The sub-collective

members began to figuratively fidget as contact was not going according to plan. Finally a hail was received.

"This is traffic controller Kirl to alien vessel with the stupid shape. Move that monstrosity to orbit beyond our moons, or else. You will apply for permission to enter near orbit like every other ship." Pause. "You have made hash of my neat schedule, and I'll be sure to make it up by skimming it from whatever profits you expect to gain from trade items." The hail abruptly cut off; the controller expected action to follow his demands, not discussion.

Captain stared at his viewscreen. No video had accompanied the audio, so the screen continued to show the rotating globe below. Whites, blues, greens, browns... a typical M-class planet. The Collective would be pleased, was pleased. The cube was not going to move. Rapid commands flew through the dataspaces of the cube, resulting in the hail being traced back to its source. A new line of communications was opened.

"We are the Borg. Resistance is futile. You will prepare your populace to be assimilated."

The reply which came was swift. This time a face filled the viewscreen, one of a portly member of species #8511, thick jowls hanging below puffy face. Sparse green hair was on the greasy side. The six eyes glared. "Is this picture of the interior of an industrial processor some type of joke? Borg... Borg... now I remember! You are that stupid ship on some stupid quest of galaxy domination. You even managed to take out a couple of our frigates a few weeks ago. Pure luck."

"Resistance is futile."

"Whatever. You are still lousing up my schedule. Why don't you go sit somewhere not in my jurisdiction and think about things for a bit."

{What a smug bas-} The thought rattling around in the intranet cut off. The cube was in far orbit. There had been no sense of movement... one second the planet was in a corner of Captain's viewscreen, picture in picture fashion, the next the view was several million kilometers distant.

"There. Don't call us, we'll call you. When you decide to act civilized, then maybe we can talk things over." Communications went dead.

Captain immediately began directing Sensors to find a target on the surface of the nearer moon, then turned his attention to Weapons.

{Weapons. You will completely destroy whatever target Sensors finds. Understand? Show of definitive force.}

The reply from Weapons was not issued in words, but as a barely restrained desire for mindless violence. Captain had not only let the bull into the China shop, but had pointed it at the priceless Ming vases. On purpose.

Weapons eagerly awaited the incoming data from Sensors. When it came, a fairly large facility of indeterminate function was brightly highlighted; large red arrows floated in the perception of the target, marking shuttle landing pads and airlocks to hemispherical domes. Acting before command and control could object, Weapons grabbed engine functions, directing those in his hierarchy to ready torpedoes for saturation bombardment.

Torpedoes radiating a green aura left the multiple tubes which studded the cube face currently pointing towards to the target. Down they streaked, raining onto the surface of the artificial moon, kicking up quantities of dust. Finally Captain managed to stop Weapons' bombardment, pointing out to the other drone that there would be many

other targets needing torpedoes when the species began their inevitable resistance. Weapons complied.

The dust would obscure the surface for several thousand years, slowly pulled back to the ground by the low gravity of the artificial moon. Immense gravity was warping the space near the satellite's core, but it quickly dampened to a strength expected if the planetoids were of natural origin. Sensors probed the cloud to determine the extent of the hidden damage. The conclusion was perplexing as radar shadows were deciphered and the implications relayed into the general knowledge of the sub-collective: the base appeared to be fully intact.

A hail demanded acknowledgment. Captain answered.

"Stupid Borg blockheads aboard the idiotic vessel," screamed controller Kirl, jowls quivering, "I told you to think things over, not tarnish the new paint on Huw resupply base. It will take /days/ for the base personnel to settle the dust; do you know how much time and energy it takes to grouf that much floating regolith?"

"Resistance...."

"Is futile. Yah, yah...whatever. Why don't you think things over a bit more? This time farther from Jharin Prime."

When Cube #347 determined its location, it found itself five light years distant.

Half a time period later, Cube #347 was carefully placing itself into orbit around the orange-tinged primary, approximately one million kilometers sunward of Jharin Prime. The location, while distant from the desired target, was cluttered with a dozen satellites. By the micrometeoroid scars and dust pits, the machines were old; however, three were still working. Sunspot, flare, and solar radiation monitoring were the most likely function of the aged satellites, but no time beyond a cursory examination was allotted to confirm the hypothesis.

One of the satellites exploded, followed closely by a second and third. The phaser causing the destruction missed the next shot, but numbers four, five, and six vaporized to expanding clouds of hot plasma.

{Weapons!} admonished Captain.

{What?} Seven: fizzle. Miss. Eight, nine, ten: debris fly outward as a trio of quantum torpedoes scored direct hits.

{Never mind. Why bother telling you anything now?} Eleven and twelve, neither functional to begin with, were carved into four equal parts each with cutting beams.

{We needed some target practice.} With the sending came the distinct impression the weaponry hierarchy was a bit spooked over the apparent nondestruction of the lunar base, and needed to convince itself that species #8511 was vulnerable in their home system. Captain wasn't going to pine over a few worthless satellites.

This time consensus dictated there would be no polite request for species #8511 to surrender. Battle-class and Assimilation-class cubes had been dispatched from distant locations, but it would be several weeks before the first would arrive. The Greater Consciousness had directed Cube #347 to garner a toehold for the Collective to exploit in the assimilation of the Jharin home system population.

Cube #347 was rarely tasked to begin actual assimilation procedures: there were too many variables (four thousand to be exact) the Collective had to take into account. For the hive, micromanaging on the scale of less than several million drones was

difficult. It was much easier to figuratively say "make it so," and rely on the programmed instincts of a well-integrated sub-collective to accomplish the task. Cube #347 was anything but well-integrated. The effort involved would be alike a human wiggling their ears - possible...if one wanted to take the time to practice. "Practicing" in the case of the Greater Consciousness versus Cube #347 meant fostering a close association with those whom were imperfectly assimilated, which was unacceptable.

In the instance of species #8511 an exception had been carefully contemplated and decided feasible. The hive mind would not micromanage, but instead demand a mass assimilation of a target, afterward of which appropriate neural transceiver hardware would be installed. Those new drones would be immediately integrated into the Greater Consciousness, avoiding (hopefully) the corrupting influence of the deviant sub-collective. The new drones, while not having all the proper augmentations, would nonetheless be perfectly capable to continue the cycle of assimilation without any further action by Cube #347 beyond that of technical and engineering support. By the time Battle-class and Assimilation-class vessels arrived, a substantial Borg population would be established, easily able to counter resistance. Prostheses, assemblies, and other hardware could then be installed at leisure.

At least that was the plan. It would require exacting precision by Cube #347 because the complete process of assimilation, surgery, and integration of the new drone would have to occur in a manner of hours once the assault began, but the current combination of hierarchy heads was oddly competent. The station of a certain controller Kirl was determined to be a suitable target.

Occasionally the Borg would figuratively butt their collective heads against a brick wall in the quest for Perfection. Without /knowing/ a species through assimilation, little obstacles such as grouf tended to be ignored; and while multiple dozens of Jharin drones were in stasis aboard Cube #347, due to the corruption-prone nature of assimilation imperfection only a few had been briefly awakened from their initial career change to have their minds turned inside-out. Grouf was not understood and, thus, was irrelevant. The Borg tended to have very hard heads, and very powerful weapons for backup: walls did not stay barriers for long. In such a respect, Cube #347 was no different than any fully integrated sub-collective.

Calculations completed, Cube #347 jumped to warp, seconds later dropping into near orbit of Jharin Prime.

Traffic patterns above the planet were snarled. Subspace was filled with chatter, eavesdropping on which increased the "inventive cursing" knowledge base of species #8511 ten-fold. The cause of the problem, Cube #347, was ignored. Or was of no more consequence than a fly at a barbecue - annoying, but easily swatted. The thought was oddly chilling.

Captain orientated the ship according to Sensors' directions, sending the cube on a direct intercept of station "Space Traffic Control", or STC; an expanded acronym as used by several enraged pilots was more colorful. Two tugs hauling a several ton chunk of rock were not quick enough to overcome inertia and move out of Cube #347's way. They disintegrated on the cube's shielding. The rock was swiftly tractorized and flung towards the nearest moon. The rampage came to a swift end.

{Report!} barked Captain into the dataspace. Forward momentum of the cube,

against all known laws of physics, had come to an abrupt stop with no apparent cause. Thrusters were useless and impulse could not budge the cube one centimeter. Warp, conventional and transwarp, was momentarily considered, then dismissed as suicidal. As replies of {I don't know} and {One of my bodies has fallen into an interstitial space via a panel that /should/ have been closed, so I'm just a little bit occupied at the moment, thank you} were returned, a hail was received.

Kirl's unsavory face filled the viewscreen. The two leftmost eyes erratically twitched from a nervous tic. The controller looked quite haggard. "Still won't let me see what you look like, eh? Well, I don't care if you are all pus-filled bags of maggot droppings, or the most beautiful creatures to come out of the Dorivian district whorehouses since Jilli and her twin Viepha, but you have made me mad." Kirl shifted into screaming mode. "My work shift ended an hour ago! The traffic patterns you have single-handedly snarled are the worst on record! Up until now remarkable restraint has been shown towards you, but the last warning has been given. You must now face the consequences.

"Our god will deal with you. He's not the nice and forgiving pushovers we at STC tend to be."

Kirl disappeared, leaving the cube to wonder just what he had meant. It was dismissed; deities were irrelevant. The immediate concern centered around determining what was holding the ship in place, then focusing on solving the problem.

::Greetings!:: said a voice NOT BORG into the minds of all those aboard Cube #347. ::I will deal with you! Your leader, he will come to me!::

Captain suddenly found himself standing on an empty plain. One moment he was in his nodal intersection sequentially initiating thrusters to fire individually for the purpose of discerning a weak spot in the trap, and the next was...nowhere. What was it with apparently omnipotent beings and the featureless infinite? One would think a supreme force could at least expend the energy for a little decorating; even the Borg added the proper theatrical touches to what would otherwise be gunmetal gray decks, bulkheads, and pipes. But noooo...all anecdotal evidence and "personal" second-hand experiences demonstrated that omnipotence was highly correlated with a total lack of taste.

And if this was a ploy to make an individual feel inadequate and insignificant, it was not working. Borg could not be alone, not even those on Cube #347. Besides, his transceiver still operating; and, therefore, Captain had come to the decision his link with the immediate universe had not been severed, even if he no longer exactly knew where he was located.

A member of species #8511 shimmered into sight. He (at least it externally resembled the Jharin male) was four meters tall and clothed in flowing robes of black chased with a golden hem. A green mane of lush hair cascaded down his back, off-setting six flashing emerald eyes. Although the robes hid the body, the impression as the being moved was of immense strength.

"I am Ghari!" thundered a voice. The echoes rolled over the colorless plain, lost to the infinite distance.

Ghari was a known name, remembered from the shrine room located in the first vessel of species #8511 encountered. Captain answered, "You are a hologram?" He tried an experimental step forward. As expected, he might as well had been walking on a

treadmill for all the distance closed between himself and the towering presence.

"Insolent creature! I Am The One And Only Ghari! All rest are pale acolytes of mySelf!" Curiously, the capitals actually could be heard in the pronouncement. Captain was not impressed, nor the crew on the other end of his link: it could now be seen where the "bugger off" and "damn you" attitude of species #8511 had originated. Of course, not every species had their own personal, tangible, "in-your-face-when-you-call" god.

"You are not a hologram." It was a statement, not a question.

Ghari's face darkened. His eyes were miniature flares. "You will bow before me, creature! How dare you assault my people!"

It seemed Ghari could not not talk in exclamations. Captain began to berate his sub-collective to find /someway/ to get him back, or at least figure out where he was physically located, which was currently not aboard the cube. Until the consensus was completed..."Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated."

Red face turned purple, then, "Ha! You are a funny creature! You amuse me! Perhaps I will let you live a few hours more, if only because you might make me laugh!"

Captain stared at Ghari; Ghari stared back. Captain tried several different filter configurations of his optical implant, but no information was forthcoming. A few more steps leading nowhere, and Captain was ready to leave the place. "You will let this drone go."

"Little being, you are quite amusing! Did you really think you, your crew, and your blasphemous ship could harm my people?"

The Borg and their cubes had been called many things over the centuries, most not polite. Blasphemous was a new figure of speech. Before he could stop himself, Captain asked "Blasphemous? How is a ship blasphemous?" With the words barely out of his mouth, Captain was already leaping over his link and diving mentally into the pathways of the sub-collective, trying to figure out where the impulse had come. The conclusion was sobering...the impetus had arisen from within his own mind, not anyone else. In the best tradition of assimilation imperfection, self-control had momentarily slipped, allowing remaining shreds of individual to shamefully take control.

Ghari glared at Captain as if the Borg were a small bug that needed to be squashed. "How could your overly large ship not be blasphemous? It charges through the nebulous ether, disregarding the inharmonious overtones it causes in its wake! There is no careful parting of the potentials, no smoothing of the fabric of the mind! Senseless vandalizing wherever you travel, your ship...ALL the ships from the Outside! It does not matter your species or civilization, you are all sniveling slugs!

"You no longer amuse me! Go back to your ship and await your doom! An appropriate method of punishment must be devised by my worshipers! Take what time remains in your meaningless life to come to terms with your failures!"

Before Captain could comment, he was back in his nodal intersection. As before, there was no sense that he had been moved; one moment of perception he was on the infinite plain, the next in familiar surroundings.

{Report!}

Quiet. Unusual quiet. Guilty quiet. One could hear a bolt drop down the central shaft between subsections 5 and 23, if one were inclined to do so, and if the artificial gravity systems were tweaked to create a true up-down orientation over 1.3 kilometers. It wouldn't be all that hard, just a little minor rewiring. Of course, several subsections

would have to be without gravity, and everyone in subsection 23 would be walking on the ceiling....

{Stop that chain of thought, 56 of 212.}

{Oops,} came the distant reply.

Captain sighed, {So, absolutely no data was gathered to explain what happened to me? Sensors, you are hiding something.}

{Well,} carefully said Sensors, {There was an increase in [green fog] output in the nearer of the artificial moons.}

{A moon that is probably as well, if not better, protected by the same grouf that made the lunar station unassailable. This grouf is known to be technologically boosted, but we can't get destroy the moons unless we remove the grouf-enhanced defenses...which is impossible without destroying the moons.} The case of circular logic wound in typical convoluted fashion.

{Yes.}

Second, standing next to Captain in the nodal intersection, stated verbally, "Chicken and egg."

"Pardon?" asked Captain, thinking that his backup consensus monitor had just lost his sanity.

"Terran reference. And no, I'm no more instable than usual. Look it up in the databases; it is a simplistic explanation for a circular paradox like this one. One cannot complete task A without first doing task B, but task B prevents the successful undertaking of task A."

"And does the same Terran database provide any hints on how to overcome the paradox?" Captain already knew the answer, but had to ask the scalding question.

Second's reply was mild. "Not really. There are a few other references to eggs, several involving an omelet, but nothing that really applies."

"You are /so/ helpful."

"Thank you, I try." The sarcasm was returned in spades.

Back to prying information from the sensor hierarchy. {Sensors?}

{We are busy analyzing data now. Sensors will get back to you when Sensors has an answer.}

"Don't count your chickens before they've hatched?" returned Second, a helpful tone in both voice and mental signature. Captain just glared.

{[Turquoise whales]!} said Sensors. {Sensors now has a good idea how grouf works!}

Captain immediately pulled out of the sensor grid. While the sensor hierarchy had been focused inward on the issue of grouf, large parts of the grid had been set at standard configurations. The incoming data, while not pretty, was easier to read than that usually filtered through Sensors. The results were not encouraging, with a slow build-up of energy able to be traced on both artificial moons and at specific points on the surface of the planet. It was like watching a slow moving tsunami with the knowledge that no mountain would be high enough to escape drowning.

{How?} The one word conveyed more than the desire of one drone, it contained the will of the sub-collective to not be terminated. Sensors began to upload the conclusions of her hierarchy to the general group mind. The vital clue had come from

Ghari and his statement of "parting the potentialities" via the forward mounted engines of the barbell ships.

It was known, via painful interactions and recently assimilated information, that grouf was dependent on altering the potentialities inherent within the nebula; essentially, a limited area psi-ability that only worked inside a specific spatial boundary. Machines, computers and power sources, coordinated and enhanced grouf on both individual and group platforms, focusing desires into quasi-coherent form, which was then either applied locally, else projected to another place via an established network of subspace receivers/transmitters. For all to work well, it was necessary for the polarized eta radiation which was the fundamental base of grouf to remain as smooth and undisturbed as possible: overly "lumpy" areas distorted grouf, making it weak and unpredictable. Thus the forward mounted drives of the dumbbell ships were a necessary engineering design for species #8511, acting as a dampener of destructive subspace waves and preserving the optimal grouf environment. Actual traveling efficiency was sacrificed, but within the nebula there were none to challenge the supremacy of the Jharin...until the Borg arrived. As it was, it appeared Cube #347 would not be the conduit for a Borg invasion any time soon.

Concluded Sensors: {And Ghari appears to be the metabelief of species #8511, given the form of an egotistical god-creature whom protects their race. While Ghari is nothing more than a series of [shivers] in the local [fog], powered by overly huge energy sources, he is nonetheless quite able to kick our collective [butts]. That is why Sensors could not determine where you went. You were polarized to the same frequencies as the Ghari metabelief, interacting with him on his [airplane]. Your mind remained in contact with us, but we could not track your body.}

The sub-collective digested the conclusion, arriving at the consensus that the task of Cube #347 was to be logged as incomplete even as the four thousand drones were reduced to faint echoes in the Greater Consciousness. The prospect of physical death was sobering. Captain sighed and was about to start the process of fully linking with the Collective to query for further options - unlikely...the loss of one Exploratory-class cube was insignificant, especially when it contained the Collective's rejects - and begin downloading the contents of stored datafiles into general archives when Delta inserted a hold command. Shaking off the temporary mental paralysis, Captain focused on the head of the engineering hierarchy.

Delta did not have anything to offer, but a drone designated 78 of 240 - formerly a hacker and pirate of both radio and subspace broadcasts - had much to relate.

{Like, you know, this Ghari-dude is a collection of modulated frequencies. One can do /anything/ with waves, if you know how to ride them. And, like, we can do that...ride the wave. Simple work to alter the deflectors to emit a carrier on the brain-band broadcast species #8511 emotes at, but the problem is the final output. We can project our mental signatures to that totally boring place where you were physically stolen. Ghari-dude is belief given form; we need something comparable, or we will be a uselessly giant galactic radio station with no listening audience.

{Problem: what is it we believe in strongly enough to challenge the fundamental god-dude faith of several billion worshippers?}

78 of 240 formulated both theory and question succinctly, interspersing many

"dude"s and "like you know"s throughout. As a corollary it was also theoretically possible to cancel the effects of grouf directed at Cube #347, if - and it was a big if - one could precisely modulate shields to vibrate in a pattern of interference. The method was similar to adaptation to offensive weaponry, except the cube had to somehow sense all the minute variations of grouf...as it was focused on them.

Captain split the sub-collective into two parts, one laboring on defense, the other on offense. Adding urgency to the search, it was still unknown how much time remained until species #8511, through Ghari, wiped Cube #347 from the universe. Power still built on the surface of the planet and under the moons; it seemed the Jharin were big believers in spectacular overkill.

A full third of the deflectors embedded in the hull were in the process of modification. Mild cases of radiation poisoning were hampering the effort, but the inconvenience was only that...an inconvenience. More serious was the campaign to come up with an appropriate illusion in which to challenge and break Ghari, thus hopefully stunning the population of species #8511 long enough for Cube #347 to continue its advance.

{Too late!} interrupted Sensors into the growing debate between the images of a giant drone or a Battle-class cube. {Sensors sees the [green frog] on the planet has leveled; the moons are not far behind.}

Delta: {Deflector modifications are complete. Offense is ready, but defense will be dependent upon us staying alive long enough for systems to analyze and adapt to the wave modulations of species #8511.}

{Initiate,} spoke Captain as he engaged the command codes to divert the mental processes of four thousand drones from the normal chaos of the dataspaces, through an eta band polarized filter, and into a different pseudo-reality. Physically the crew of Cube #347 remained within their ship (most in their alcoves), but mental perceptions viewed the mock-universe inhabited by Ghari.

And boy was the god of species #8511 pissed.

"By all the ether demons, what sort of infernal creature are you?" roared Ghari. The featureless plain which Captain had seen continued to stretch into infinity, but now a vast throne of gold and colored minerals gilded with platinum was included in the vista, near which stood a tall mirror. Ghari posed before the chair, glaring, robes theatrically rustling despite the fact there was no wind. The god had been interrupted in the middle of a preening session: one had to look one's best before smiting enemies.

{What the...?} came from Second, or at least those were his surface thoughts. Consciousness was extremely fluid in Ghari's domain, more so than the Borg dataspaces of Cube #347 where one could partition off others if warranted. Random images swirled from one topic to another; the perception which was Second had locked onto the mirror, dragging all others to contemplate its significance.

A vast school of fish, floating in midair without any visible means of support, goggled back. In the current realm it was impossible to determine length, but each body was probably similar in size to Ghari's thumb. Sides were a silvered gray, piebald in appearance with small implants and areas of missing scales. Fins spread wide to scull the air as toothed jaws open wide in uncomprehending disbelief.

A fragment from Doctor: {The fish images bear an uncanny resemblance to little Mopsy, Gerny, Scales, Finny, and Bubbles. I wonder...yes, that /is/ me, the one thrashing

its tail just so. I make a cute fishy.}

{Gerny? Scales?}

{Mopsy?? Finny?? Bubbles??}

{Bubbles???

Ghari was emitting a stream of curses, but that was irrelevant at the moment. The sub-collective was turning inward, mentalities focusing upon the most probable cause of the predicament: Doctor. More precisely, Doctor and the image of the small tank of fish he had hid in the interstitial space of a maintenance bay. Fish that, yes, were near twins to the school staring back from Ghari's mirror.

{I am a fish!} shouted the dual voice of Delta. Two partially scaled bodies were disrupting the whole as they forced their way towards a certain individual at the front of the group. {This is all your fault, you mentally deviant rat! If we get out of this, I am personally going to make sushi out of your pets; and afterwards I will turn your existence into a living nightmare!}

Ahemed Ghari, "Ether demons?"

The school of Borg fish swiveled towards the god as One, << SHUT UP! Can't you see we have a major problem here? >> before returning to more immediate concerns.

Ghari appeared to be stymied. One could only imagine how the rebuke was manifesting itself in the real universe. The sudden "gong" followed by a "sloshing" of the infinite plain, as if someone had fallen against and almost tipped over an aquarium, gave an indication. Sensor grid data routed through those slivers of awareness which were serving as an umbilical back to Cube #347 reported an attack; shields held, adaptation had commenced.

Captain and Second herded the members of the command and control hierarchy together, then sent them into the bowels of the school to re-establish a semblance of order. The question of why the sub-collective had manifested itself as fish had to be answered, as well as the necessity of knowing if the Ghari belief would be vulnerable to attack by such a pitiful offensive display. One hated these metaphysical realms.

{78 of 240, this predicament came partially from your theories...} began Captain as he singled out the named drone. The fish in the immediate vicinity of 78 of 240 drew back.

{Hey, hey, hey, Captain dude!} interrupted 78 of 240. {I just handle the equipment aspects. I don't understand this mess-with-your-mind trip we are dealing with here.}

Meanwhile, Doctor had found himself cornered by Delta. Nobody dared to come to his rescue. Every time Doctor attempted to dart deeper into the school, one of Delta's bodies blocked the way. Both were now advancing with a menacing air.

{Delta!} snapped Captain. {Knock it off! We've more important things to worry about than some vendetta.}

{We're going to die anyway...let me get /some/ satisfaction out of the years 27 of 27 and his collective menagerie have given me headaches,} pleaded Delta.

Up to this point, Weapons had been quiet. While not necessarily the most intelligent drone in many respects, pure blood-thirsty tactics had allowed Cube #347 to survive over the twenty-seven years he had held his dictatorship of hierarchy head. He now spoke, using the weight of his hierarchy to break up what was becoming a four-way argument as Second inserted his sarcastic opinions. {Does it really matter?}

Uncomprehending question was the response. At least the bickering had stopped.

Weapons continued, {Does it really matter? This place is a figment of our collective perceptions. Ghari isn't real; we aren't actually a school of Doctor's pet fish. These manifestations are thoughts given metaphysical form. In the real universe, probabilities are altered to batter at our ship. Here we are confronting the central belief that ties a species together.

{So what if we are a school of fish? Perhaps if we had time to practice, we could have manifested as something a bit more...impressive. A giant cube would have been nice. However, there was always the possibility Doctor's wants would frame the whole despite a unified effort on our part, and so here we are.

{And isn't this form fitting, anyway? A school of fish: many who act as One. Many eyes that see for All, irrelevant singles who can be sacrificed for the whole, a vast being of multitude parts. Let us make the most of this perception and turn Ghari into a pile of mincemeat.}

Said Delta into stunned silence, {Sometimes you amaze me, Weapons. There actually might be a sentient brain in that metal-reinforced skull of yours.}

A loud explosion shook the Borg fish. For a moment, it seemed as if the ground was to forcefully meet those members who currently hovered in the lower positions, but altitude control stabilized. Attention was focused on Ghari just in time to see him lob another fizzling rock. This time the school scattered, allowing the bomb to detonate harmlessly. A partition of engineering and tactical reported adaptation to a suite of grouf frequencies; Bulk Cargo Hold #4 was a slagged mess, but shields were holding..for now.

As the school dodged another bomb - the apparent equivalent of system adaptation - Captain wondered how long it would take for species #8511 to realize their current attack was no longer effectual. A peek at Ghari through the scaled mass of moving bodies showed the god frowning at the rock he held. The rock disappeared, to be replaced by a crossbow.

Universe view:

The ring of rocks which had englobed the cube faded from existence. Small slivers of metal the size of crowbars shimmered into sight, each a smoldering red glow and sporting a pair of blue eyes. The eyes locked onto Cube #347; the metal toothpicks pierced through Borg shielding like a hot knife through butter, impacting the hull and turning several quadrants on faces #4 and #3 into a large pincushion.

Infinite plain:

{Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!} was the new word of the day as about one hundred fifty drone fish found their skins bristling with pins. The attack was an inconvenience more than anything else as no lasting damage was done...until the nuisances began to burrow inward.

Doctor suddenly had an idea. {Tweezers. Think of tweezers. Be good fishes and give me tweezers.} Tweezers began to rain on the school. Doctor swooped down and grabbed one, his pectoral fin oddly gripping the handle. {My hierarchy...fix-'em-up time.} Fish of drone maintenance took the instruments, going to the affected comrades and wheedling out the needles.

Universe view:

One by one crowbars halted their burrowing, losing their dull red coloration. The next wave of attack splashed off the shields, as did the third.

The cycle of assault and counter continued on two levels. Outwardly Cube #347 became a patchwork mess of melted angles, shallow craters, twisted metal, and venting gasses. Only sheer bulk and noncentralized systems, assisted by ship regeneration, kept the vessel in one piece long enough for adaptation to commence. Inwardly, four thousand mottled gray fish were bruised, punctured, cut, and spindled. Odd implements ranging from a trio of giant yellow marshmallows to five hundred slinkies to a large shield made of rose quartz littered the ground beneath the school. Currently every fish was wearing a pair of mirrored sunglasses and a heavy bronze helmet.

{I think Ghari is about to give up,} observed Second. Fireworks, bright bursts of light, exploded overhead, reflecting off the sunglasses. Sharp shrapnel rained to the ground, ping-ponging off helmets. {Then again, I may be wrong.}

"You demons are resilient, but you are no match for me! I will destroy you all!" Ghari was making threats, again. It was usually a prelude to a new form of attack. A net shimmered into view above the school, dropping straight down. Instinctively every fish faced skyward, pulling in fins and slipping through the large holes.

Weapons shouted, {It is a familiar attack! We have adapted!} It was true...Cube #347 had survived long enough for systems to recognize and repulse assault. In the real universe, offensives shattered (literally at times) on the shields. {We must advance!} ordered Weapons.

Like a salmon straining against a strong current, Borg fish faced Ghari and his throne, caudal fins thrashing in the effort to near the pseudogod. It was unknown what would happen once the goal was achieved, but the target needed to be caught first. Mirroring the unseen, a Borg cube shook as thrusters lit the dark with a purple flare. Slowly, ponderously, the vessel moved closer to the orbit of Space Traffic Control station.

Sweat ran down Ghari's face as six eyes squinted in concentration and fists clenched in rage. The intangible current became a torrent, halting the Borg advance. Stalemate. The sub-collective of Cube #347 could not draw close enough either in reality or the metaphysical to cause damage, but neither could species #8511 break the integrity of the ship.

Weapons whined, {No fair! This is not a direct attack. We can't adapt to this passive stuff.}

{Too many,} confirmed Delta. {We are four thousand against many billions. We may be One in purpose, but they have sheer power, both mentally and technologically, behind their resistance.}

The school drew back slightly, then abruptly turned with heads pointed inwards. It was a visual representation of the search for a consensus to the problem. Occasionally one or two fish would dart away from the group, but were swiftly reintegrated into the milling mass. At one point the gathering split into two unequal parts, but the dissension was short-lived.

Consensus was achieved. The sub-collective needed more minds, and there was only one plausible place to gain them. The solution necessitated alteration of more deflectors, increased output from energy cores, and many other miscellaneous hardware modifications. Most importantly it obligated Captain and a large portion of the command and control hierarchy to do a fancy bit of persuasive arguing. The sub-collective disappeared from the featureless land: much to do in reality and little time to accomplish

it.

Captain returned to Ghari's realm with an audible "pop". A quick glance towards the mirror confirmed that yes, he was still a fish. The perception, once given form, appeared to stick, despite wishes to the contrary. Ghari himself stood regally before his throne, clothes on the ruffled side and hair in disarray, but otherwise proud. "Have you come to surrender, demon?" boomed Ghari. "Or are you simply going to admit my people cannot, as you say, be assimilated, and then go bugger yourself off to pester other species?"

"Neither," mildly returned Captain. As he said so, members of his sub-collective began to shimmer into view, fins sculling empty air. On the reality of Cube #347, final preparations were completed, allowing the remaining members to securely plug themselves back into their alcoves. Shortly the full complement of the ship was arrayed before the god of species #8511.

But it did not stop there.

A subset of the Greater Consciousness, a mere trillion minds, turned attention towards an insignificant cube stuck deep in the heart of a vast nebula. Questing towards the vessel, attempting to make a link with the wayward sub-collective requesting assistance in the task of breaking resistance in a species scheduled for assimilation, the Greater Consciousness followed the thread of mentalities through a polarized filter and into the pseudo-reality. Between one moment and the next, the infinite plain became a vast aquarium filled with small Borg fish, all focused on Ghari.

<< Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated. >> echoed a trillion (plus four thousand) voices. The needlelike teeth of assumed forms swiftly tore the figment of belief for seven billion combined minds into shreds of insubstantial mist.

Civil war and general unrest had erupted on the planet of Jharin Prime, as well as system colonies and orbital stations. With the shattering of the unifying religious belief, the priests which had held monopolistic governmental power through rather heinous methods suddenly found themselves at the receiving end of lynching mobs. The consequence was that Cube #347 had little to do besides orbit the planet and occasionally slip into the local nebula-induced pseudo-reality to make sure no successor to Ghari was manifested.

The Greater Consciousness had decided to forego the tricky operation of the sub-collective of Cube #347 initiating mass assimilation. Wrestling with exact timing and expected confounding factors was no longer necessary. As long as species #8511 cooperated by fighting amongst themselves, the Collective was content to have the sub-collective play watchdog while properly integrated drones traversed the transwarp conduits.

Cube #347 spent the time repairing damage, playing with the local variances in probabilities (which gave Captain, Second, and the other more responsible members of the hierarchies headaches as they tried to control creative examples of havoc), and generally fought overwhelming boredom.

And then it was over...his reign as Captain was over. Battle-class and Assimilation-class cubes were entering the system; and the role of Cube #347 was finished for this task.

Captain began the shut-down protocol, sending all drones but for himself into stasis. The computer had to be reset, readying the lottery for certain positions at next activation; files needed to be ordered for the Collective to download and integrate into the Greater Consciousness. The viewscreen had to be removed and as much information as possible relating to its existence be purged from working memory. Finally it was time to set a course for shipyard Iota Beta at planet #35c, where the cube would be readied and refit prior to the next assignment.

Captain - 4 of 8 he reminded himself...now only 4 of 8 - sucked in a deep breath and initiated the last of the necessary command codes. As the cube leaped into transwarp, as his mind sunk into the oblivion which was the sleeping sub-collective of Cube #347, his last thoughts echoed: {Done...done...done....}